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### Undergraduate Research: The Jetmore Food Center

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## The Jetmore Food Center: A Vital Asset to the Community of Jetmore, Kansas



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The Chapman Center for Rural Studies

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When towns were created during the fast-paced settlement days of Kansas in the 1880s, one of the first buildings settlers constructed was the grocery store. The townspeople relied on the local grocery store for all their supplies and necessities. The grocery store, however, provided more than supplies. Eventually, stores turned into a local gathering place for people to catch up and share gossip, thus making the grocery store a vital social need for the community as well.<sup>i</sup> However, with advancements of automobiles people moved to larger communities, usually over 2,500 people, with more to offer. In doing so, many small towns along with their stores perished. Those grocery stores lucky enough to survive the migration of people to larger towns as well as the advancements in technology once again met a formidable foe in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the advent of large chain stores in larger towns. With low prices, a wider selection of food, as well as other necessities such as toiletries, clothes, cleaning supplies, and even sporting goods, the chain store caused many small town grocery stores to close their doors. However, many grocery stores in rural Kansas towns survive and still play a vital role in their community. Take for instance, the town of Jetmore Kansas, home of the Jetmore Food Center. Jetmore is the county seat of Hodgeman County, located in western Kansas about 30 miles north of Dodge City.<sup>ii</sup> Owned by Mark Wellbrock since 2001, the Jetmore Food Center offers customers a wide array of foods at competitive prices, along with customer service and community support that people cannot find anywhere else.

Originally, Buckner was the first name for the town during its early days in the early 1880s. However, in honor of Abraham Buckles Jetmore, a Topeka lawyer who assisted in making the town the county seat of Hodgeman County, local residents renamed the town Jetmore. On May 3, 1887, Jetmore became an incorporated city. Fortunate enough to secure

the ATSF railroad line, Jetmore flourished economically during its first two decades of existence.

A real estate advertisement in 1889 even boasted about Jetmore having three hotels, two banks, three restaurants, three grocery stores, three drug stores, four general stores, two hardware stores, five real estate agencies, and one clothing store.<sup>iii</sup> Gradually, many of these stores closed down as the need for multiple stores in one small town began to diminish.

However, Jetmore still managed to support three operating grocery stores until the 1960s.<sup>iv</sup>

The Jetmore Food Center opened for business in 1984, under the ownership of Tony Jones.

Formerly located in a building on Main Street, the Jetmore Food Center brought in and butchered local meat in the back building of the store seen below.



**Figure 1: Site of the butcher shop behind the grocery store on main straight. Meat was butchered in this tiny area, and then sold in the store.**

In 1994, Mr. Jones decided to build a much larger facility at the north end of Jetmore. Finally, in 2001, Mark Wellbrock bought the store from Mr. Jones, and has owned and operated the store with his family ever since.<sup>v</sup>

According to Mr. Wellbrock, it takes an incredible amount of dedication, manpower, and a good grasp of economics to successfully operate a small town store. Unlike chain stores, small town grocery stores do not have the means to hire out private contractors to perform maintenance or mechanical work, therefore Mr. Wellbrock and his employees perform these jobs themselves. In turn, the employees, along with Mr. Wellbrock, are more than grocers; rather they are grocers, mechanics and janitors. "When you own a small town grocery store, you have to be the CEO down to the grunt." Having a clean, well run-store is essential to the success of a small town grocery store. When a customer sees the cleanliness of a floor or well-organized aisles, they will keep continue shopping at that store because they know the employees take special care of the food. Building confidence takes time, but in the long run it is vital for the success of a grocery store. However, to maintain a grocery store at this high of a level requires many hours of dedication each week. In fact, Mr. Wellbrock often finds himself working over 100 hours a week every single week to keep the Jetmore Food Center successfully operating.

Perhaps most importantly, the owner of a grocery store must be a smart businessman. Because of the low prices of chain stores, smaller grocery stores have to adjust their prices accordingly in order to compete. Naturally, many factors determine the price of foods in a grocery store, such as the cost of shipping, cost of paying employees, electric bills, and even theft. Grocery stores, especially smaller stores, must worry about shoplifting on a daily basis.

But the Jetmore Food Center tries their best to keep prices reasonable. An effective method for doing so is to buy food in bulk, because a grocery store can purchase bulk items for a much cheaper price. Even if the store does not sell all the food immediately, the food can be stored and sold at a later date. This allows the Jetmore Food Center to sell their food at lower prices and compete with larger stores, such as Wal-Mart in Dodge City. The dedication, manpower, and savvy business techniques added together create a successful small town grocery store. It is essential to have a well-run and well-kept grocery store in a small town, because the store greatly helps the community in many ways.

In its most important role, the Jetmore Food Center aids the community by providing food to the citizens of Jetmore. In general, the majority of those that shop in the Jetmore Food Center are above the age of 40, but the store serves to customers of all ages. The store opens at 8 A.M and stays open until 8 P.M at night six days a week. On Sundays, Mr. Wellbrock opens the store from 10 A.M to 6 P.M. In the past, stores in Jetmore closed at 6 P.M every day and closed on Sundays. This caused problems for many residents of Jetmore, as many work in Dodge City and did not return to Jetmore until the evening. Therefore, residents had to shop in Dodge City or wait until the weekend to do their grocery shopping. But when Mr. Wellbrock took the store over in 2001 he sought to change that trend. Now, Jetmore residents can return home from a long day's work and have the convenience of shopping at their home town grocery store. The store also caters to individual requests from customers. The Jetmore Food Center contains many items customers cannot find anywhere else, such as homemade goods from the surrounding areas.

However, the Jetmore Food Center does much more for the community than provide

groceries. Mr. Wellbrock believes a small town grocery store is the backbone for a strong community, because it aids the populace in so many ways. Like most small towns grocery stores, the Jetmore Food Center donates food and drinks to the school, the hospital, as well as clubs and organizations that hold special events in Jetmore. Once again, aiding and partaking in events in the community further strengthens townspeople's confidence in their local grocer, which in turn helps a store succeed. Also, unlike chain stores, the profit dollars made from a small town grocery store circulate back into the community. The circulation of money in a small town is one of the most important factors in its progression. Consequently, if the grocery store loses business to a larger store in another town, that money no longer circulates in the community. It is a vicious cycle that actually could lead to the demise of the town. In that regard, "the store means just as much to the community as a hospital or school." The Jetmore Food Center also provides jobs to high school students looking to make a few extra dollars. Working at the store teaches teenagers proper work ethics, job skills, life skills, people skills, as well individual decision making skills. As the teenagers enter college and adulthood, they can utilize the skills acquired while working at the Jetmore Food Center.

People living in small towns naturally have small town values. Kids who go off to college and live in larger towns or even cities will take these small town values and instill them in their new neighborhood or community. Many people, including Mr. Wellbrock, feel these small town values must be taken to larger communities. However, if the town's grocery store disappears, a small town has a serious chance of becoming lost. In turn, those small town values die with the town. Without a doubt, the Jetmore Food Center keeps Jetmore a successful small town in Kansas. From offering quality food at reasonable prices, to providing

jobs for the youth and teaching them vital skills for adulthood, the Jetmore Food Center is the lifeblood of the community of Jetmore.



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<sup>i</sup> See Richard W. Stoffle, "Whither the Country Store?" Ethnohistory,

<sup>ii</sup> I used Google Maps to determine to the location of Jetmore

<sup>iii</sup> "History of Jetmore" <http://skyways.lib.ks.us/towns/Jetmore/history.html>

<sup>iv</sup> For this, I observed the advertisements in the Jetmore Republican for a forty year period from 1930-1970. In the 30s, 40s, and 50s there were multiple advertisements for multiple stores. However, as time progressed, the ads for stores became fewer.

<sup>v</sup> All information regarding the store along with quotations is taken from an interview with Mark Wellbrock held October 10, 2010, in Jetmore, Kansas.